Portuguese Mercenary Networks in Seventeenth-Century India: An Experiment in Global Microhistory and its Archive

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Abstract

Thousands of runaways left the Portuguese empire during the early modern period, but very little is known about the lived experience of this diverse group of individuals after they fled. This article questions the framework of analysis that reduces such a complex social phenomenon to the overarching category of “informal empire,” while testing the hypothesis that the issue of the archive lies at the core of the practice of global microhistory. A set of primary sources in Portuguese, Dutch, English, Marathi, and Persian is analyzed at close range to reconstruct the choices, motivations, and hesitations of a specific group of “Portuguese” – mostly dark-skinned *mestiços* of modest origin – who served as mercenaries in north-western Deccan. I argue that studying the networks of these mercenaries ultimately reveals localized forms of endurance and adaptation to rapid and disruptive changes brought about locally by imperial rivalry and long-distance commerce.

Keywords

Correspondence – Deccan sultanates – Dutch and English East India companies – Goa Inquisition – Malik ‘Ambar – *mestiços* – Mughal empire – Portuguese empire

Introduction

On March 31, 1629 the carrack *Bom Jesus do Monte Calvário* entered Lisbon harbor after a long, perilous voyage across the Indian and Atlantic Oceans. The ship had left Goa, the capital of Portuguese Asia on the western seaboard...
of India, about one year earlier, together with a smaller vessel. The latter soon wandered away. After a stop in Pernambuco, Brazil, it was intercepted by a Dutch fleet and its captain and other crew members were killed. Meanwhile, the Calvário was held back by storms around the Cape of Good Hope for three and a half months before reaching, in a wretched state, the port of Luanda, in Angola.\(^1\) The water damaged a significant part of the cargo but spared a case file deemed worthy “of great consideration,” which the inquisitors of Goa were sending to their superiors in Portugal.\(^2\) When the Calvário finally arrived in Lisbon, all eyes must have been on its main passenger, Dom Francisco da Gama, the outgoing viceroy of Portuguese Asia (r. 1622–1628) who was returning to the kingdom under arrest. We can imagine, however, an agent of the Inquisition squeezing through the crowd on the dockside to reach the carrack and collect the annual correspondence and other papers from Goa, including the case file mentioned above, which would have then been swiftly delivered to the ministers of the Holy Office.

This article has an inquisitorial record at its core. I will comment extensively on the man to whom the case file refers, Gaspar Gomes de Faria, a mestigo of Portuguese and Indian ancestry.\(^3\) Originally from the Portuguese littoral settlement in Chaul, where he once had been a horse dealer, Gomes spent seventeen years in a neighboring sultanate, in which he served in various military and administrative roles before returning to Portuguese territory in 1625. My intention is not to tell the story of his life. I will instead focus on the networks of individuals like Gomes in a frontier zone where cross-cultural relations were the norm. The early seventeenth century saw global empires and local polities strenuously competing in western India (Figure 1). It was a time when fragile sultanates in the north-western Deccan, such as Ahmadnagar and Bijapur, were developing flexible strategies to cope with the advance of the Mughals from the north, while the penetration of the Dutch and English East India companies (the VOC and EIC, respectively) posed a further threat to the

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1 “Armadas que partiram para a Índia (1509–1640),” in Lisbon, Biblioteca Nacional de Portugal (BNP), Reservados, Caixa 26, no. 153; Relação das Náos e Armadas da India com os sucessos delas que se puderam saber, para noticia e instrucçao dos curiosos, e amantes da Historia da India (British Library, Códice Add. 20902), ed. Maria Hermínia Maldonado (Coimbra, 1985), 142–143.
3 Lisbon, Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo, Inquisição de Lisboa, Processo 4933 (Processo Gomes).
FIGURE 1 India in the early seventeenth century.
Portuguese cities and outposts on the Konkan coast and their trade interests.⁴ In this context, many “Portuguese” – a fluid category which extended to those born in India from Portuguese parents as well as to mestiços – deserted and offered military services to local overlords.⁵ Gaspar Gomes was one of them.

According to a commonly held interpretation, a large and varied movement of Portuguese runaways led to the creation of a “shadow empire” in the Bay of Bengal and Southeast Asia. Their number may have been as high as a few thousand in the early seventeenth century. We are dealing with people of many different sorts, such as soldiers, criminals, and convicts, often bringing with them enslaved people from East Africa and India. Mostly dark-skinned mestiços who had never been to Portugal, these runaways usually married native women and had children by them, converted to Islam or Buddhism, and learned to speak the languages of the region where they lived; their descendants were eventually absorbed into local society. Some of them kept loose relations with the Portuguese empire, typically fostering commercial links.⁶

Very little is known about the lived experience of Portuguese runaways after they fled.⁷ Nevertheless, some scholars go as far as to argue that, taken collectively, fugitives, mercenaries, and smugglers came to constitute the “free agents” of an “informal empire,” which was at the center stage of the Portuguese overseas enterprise as a whole. They are said to have belonged to “a borderless, self-organized, often cross-cultural, multi-ethnic, pluri-national and stateless world.” Such a model postulates a “structural role” of faceless human beings incessantly engaged in establishing networks in order to overcome the constraints of laws and institutions, which only existed to be circumvented or

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⁵ On the meanings of Portuguese identity in this context, see António Manuel Hespanha, *Filhos da terra: Identidades mestiças nos confins da expansão portuguesa* (Lisbon, 2019).
exploited. This is precisely the sort of abstract generalization that microhistory is expected to question through a fine-grain analysis aimed at reframing the approach to historical phenomena.

The choices made by runaways and their trajectories are particularly difficult to reconstruct. What makes Gaspar Gomes’s case file unique is the degree of detail it contains about the strategies, voices, and feelings of Portuguese mercenaries in the service of Malik ‘Ambar, a formerly enslaved Abyssinian who became the regent of the Nizam Shahi Sultanate of Ahmadnagar from 1607 until his death in 1626. Malik ‘Ambar seized power in the aftermath of a major loss of territories inflicted by the Mughals. Occasionally enjoying the support of his neighboring sultan, Ibrahim ‘Adil Shah II of Bijapur (r. 1580–1627), he was able to resist Mughal military pressure for almost two decades. We may wonder what locality and network meant to those Portuguese who moved back and forth across the borders of this unstable region, adjusted to the varying demands and seasonality of the Indian military labor market, and forged new bonds within alien societies, yet at the same time maintained close links with their communities of origin.

An inquisitorial document necessarily provides an incomplete picture of the actions of Portuguese mestiços in the Deccan sultanates, so profoundly


9 As reiterated by Francesca Trivellato in her seminal article “Is There a Future for Italian Microhistory in the Age of Global History?,” California Italian Studies 2, no. 1 (2011).


different from the trading settlements of the shadow empire west of Cape Comorin. I began this article with the story of the disrupted travel of Gomes’s case file from Goa to Lisbon precisely because the experiment in which I will engage is aimed at testing the hypothesis that the issue of the archive and its boundaries lies at the core of the practice of “global microhistory.” I argue that “seeing the world like a microhistorian” entails grappling with various types of evidence produced in different languages and contexts, the circumstances of their circulation and survival, as well as the ways in which they can be related to each other. I will follow the method of “tracking the names,” proposed in a classic article by Carlo Ginzburg and Carlo Poni. Its application to individuals called by different names in different localities demonstrates how crucial the patient exercise of retrieving connected pieces of information from materials and repositories scattered across continents is to the slower global history that microhistory advocates.

My analysis will start by discussing how the inquisitorial framework in which Gomes’s case file was put together indelibly shaped the stories about the Portuguese in the service of Malik ‘Ambar included in the document. I will next look at the fragmentary information about some of these mercenaries which can be found in reports written by VOC and EIC agents and representatives. The networks which runaways used when joining – or fleeing – the Nizam Shahi army will then be investigated. This will lead us to consider sources in Persian and Marathi, where specific Portuguese mercenaries have – exceptionally – left traces. A whole world will be revealed in which adventurers of modest origin, at a time of meagre opportunities, sought to earn a living at the fringes of the Portuguese empire despite the endemic state of war in the north western Deccan region. Though few among them rose to high military and administrative positions in Ahmadnagar, these individuals ultimately provided an example of endurance and adaptation. Loyalty could always be negotiated.

yet the networks which assisted the mercenaries remained largely based on the personal contacts they had in Portuguese territory.

**Fiction in the Inquisitorial Archives: Renegade Tales and Their Tellers**

Recently appointed as prosecutor of the Goa Inquisition, Gaspar Cardoso de Sampaio did not have time to sit around at the beginning of 1628. There were about one hundred people on trial. Yet, in late January, he requested permission to bring charges against a man called Gaspar Gomes de Faria, whose remains lay buried in the local Convent of São Domingos. The inquisitors complained about the prosecutor's excess of zeal and errors, which they attributed to his lack of experience. Nevertheless, they authorized Cardoso to collect evidence before they consulted Lisbon about Gomes's indictment, which they did not support. In line with the inquisitorial practice, a “true copy” of the proceedings was made on March 13, 1628, three days before the departure of the Calvário. Its creation and shipping are all the more important because the original trials of the Portuguese tribunal in India do not survive.

As the duplicate of a case file created between January and March 1628, our document contains a variety of materials from the secret archive of the Goa Inquisition. These include extracts from the depositions given by six runaways between 1612 and 1626, the transcript of two sessions that Gomes had with the inquisitors late in 1625, and, finally, the copies of private letters and other papers that Gomes handed in as proof that he had never repudiated the Catholic faith when he lived in Ahmadnagar. Basically, these records resulted from the standard procedure set out by the Inquisition in consultation with the Crown for subjects who had spent time in Muslim lands. For both the authorities, they were “renegades,” a term commonly used in the Mediterranean context for Christian captives who converted to Islam.

According to Maria Augusta

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16 *Processo Gomes*, fol. 10v–11r.
17 As discussed in the letter cited in footnote 15.
18 See the certification in *Processo Gomes*, fol. 46v.
20 The matter was discussed and settled between the mid-1570s and the mid-1580s (Baião, *A Inquisição de Goa*, vol. 1, 267–268 and 297–306; vol. 2, 100–101).
Lima Cruz, however, the arrenegado in Portuguese Asia “was not a definite apostate from the Christian religion; he was, above all, the traitor, the betrayer of the fatherland.”

Gomes’s arrival in Goa, presumably in October 1625, hardly went unnoticed. The sight of Gomes, a man in his fifties carried on a golden palanquin and protected from the sun by a silk umbrella in the manner of the local Portuguese nobles scandalized “the people,” that is, the minority of Portuguese settlers in a cosmopolitan city of slightly less than one hundred thousand inhabitants. It is difficult to say what annoyed those who grumbled about Gomes – perhaps the fact that he was a mestiço whose public behavior challenged social conventions and racial hierarchies. The inquisitors reacted by ordering him to be “more sober” when appearing in public. At the time they had been gathering information about Gomes for more than a decade from runaways returning from Ahmadnagar. Mainly young and destitute mestiços, most of them came from the Portuguese territory called the Provéncia do Norte, a coastal strip of land from the Gulf of Cambay to the area immediately south of present-day Mumbai. The region, separated from the Deccan by the Sahyadri Range (Western Ghats), was dotted with port cities, including Chaul, the place Gomes was originally from. This urban area on the north bank at the mouth of the Kundalika River was divided into two distinct centers separated by groves of palms and other fruit trees, Upper Chaul, which looked to the hinterland and belonged to the Nizam Shahi sultanate, and Lower Chaul (Revdanda), which was nearer to the sea and under Portuguese control.

Once they came before the inquisitors in Goa, runaways crafted narratives about their life in Muslim lands which confirmed the stereotype of the renegade. The way in which they resorted to fictional elements is reminiscent of the

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23 Deposition of Gaspar Gomes de Faria, 27 October 1625 (Processo Gomes, fol. 37v).

24 Extracts from their accusations can be read in Processo Gomes, fols. 14r–33v.


pardon tales of murderers studied by Natalie Zemon Davis for sixteenth-century France.  

Those who returned from the Deccan were expected to make a confession according to an interpretative scheme in order to be absolved and reconciled with the Church. The Portuguese in the service of Malik ‘Ambar are thus invariably depicted as wearing turbans and tunics, going to the mosque together, marrying local women, and having Muslim names, which are very rarely recorded. Their world is marked by violence and transgression of sexual norms. When details are given, they are usually inconsistent or imprecise. Several references are made to the wife that Gomes is said to have left somewhere in Portuguese territory. Similarly, his hometown is variously identified as Chaul, Daman, or Bassein, all in the Província do Norte.

Any form of solidarity with other Portuguese is presented as subject to conversion to Islam, a rite of passage described as necessary for integration into local society no less than for being admitted into one of the bands of mercenaries. In our particular case, Gomes is pictured as a mighty figure and zealous proselytizer to whom the most reluctant newcomers were sent. He is said not to have allowed runaways in his house until they became Muslims and to have even induced their apostasy by making them take bhang, a cannabis drink. Ultimately, he emerges as a military leader whose power was derived from the unconditional obedience to an Islamic ruler. According to a testimony locating him as early as 1610 in Khirki, a model city built near Daulatabad where Malik ‘Ambar had recently moved the capital from Junnar, at that time Gomes already had a reputation in Chaul for being “a very rich man thanks to the villages that the king gave him.” A few years later the allegation that Gomes had taken part in distributing the booty from an attack on the Portuguese fort of Agaçaim in the Província do Norte was also circulating in Goa.

Gomes was probably aware of the rumors surrounding his person in the Portuguese empire when he asked for a safe-conduct from the Inquisition. This was granted in the spring of 1623, some two and a half years before he arrived in Goa. In the autumn of 1625 he finally introduced himself to the local inquisitors as the son of a respectable couple of settlers from Chaul. He did not identify himself as a mestiço but significantly avoided specifying his
father’s ancestry while emphasizing the latter’s social honor as someone who had received the habit of the military Order of Christ. Gomes also presented himself as a widower after the death of his first wife, Maria Pereira, from Bassein, who had borne him a daughter now married to a Portuguese settler in Goa. The core of Gomes’s narrative consists of his passage to Ahmadnagar and what followed. The story goes that in about 1608, upon his return from a trip to sell horses in Bijapur, he discovered that his property in Chaul had been sold because of debt. He crossed the border again to earn enough to redeem his goods, but after six months he decided to convert to Islam. The tale continues with the usual assimilation into a Muslim space which is only vaguely described. No geographical name is cited, and Malik ‘Ambar is generically referred to as “the regent of the land.” Exceptionally, Gomes disclosed the title he used as his name in Ahmadnagar – Nusrat Khan (Nacarate Can) – and spoke explicitly of his two new wives and the children whom he had from them. He also confessed to having many “concubines,” “twenty women or so that he bought and the others that he seized in his capacity as captain” and with whom “he lived until coming back to our lands.”

Gomes’s account of his time as Nusrat Khan concentrates on the political rituals and, above all, the religious ceremonies in which he often participated, despite his allegedly limited understanding of their significance owing to his ignorance of “the Arabic language.” What is glaringly absent from this deposition is any specific reference to his career under Malik ‘Ambar, which Gomes only incidentally hinted at when alluding to his role as “captain.” Contacts with other renegades are also hidden, except for a brief mention of the mulato Sebastião Pacheco. More emphasis is put on the exchange that Gomes maintained with Portuguese who lived in the empire – essentially a network of people based in Chaul. His friend António Pires was a case in point. “Since he was curious of books,” Gomes sent him two or three volumes left by an Englishman who passed away in Ahmadnagar.

Gomes died suddenly of a disease before his case was brought to completion. When the prosecutor, Cardoso, subsequently requested that he be posthumously sentenced as a heretic, which would have involved disinterring his body from sacred ground and confiscating his assets from his heirs, the inquisitors found that the evidence in their possession was not enough. They also pointed out that “as soon as King Malik, whom he served, sent him as governor

33 I quote from his depositions of 27 October and 5 November 1625 (Processo Gomes, fols. 34r–40r).
34 Deposition of 27 October 1625 (Processo Gomes, fol. 35v).
35 Deposition of 5 November 1625 (Processo Gomes, fol. 39r–v).
and captain-general to the lands of that king which border with ours, he imme-
diately left with a lot of people that he took with him, who were baptized, and
then presented himself to this tribunal." Ultimately, it came down to a matter
of pragmatism. Even if the accusations against Gomes were true, "inflicting
on him a public punishment," wrote the inquisitors in their verdict, "would be
greatly detrimental to the good of Christianity, because if renegades saw that a
man who left behind so many revenues and properties in the land of the Moors
to return to Christendom and had presented himself before this tribunal with
a safe-conduct, and yet was harshly sentenced as a heretic, no one else would
return from there."  

**Locating Portuguese Runaways: Snapshots from Ahmadnagar**

Gomes’s case file presents us with a set of contrasting images about Portuguese
mercenaries. It tells us more about how renegades negotiated their readmis-
sion to their empire than what they actually did in Ahmadnagar. Nusrat Khan
is portrayed as a disloyal man whose fortune was built on betrayals, epitomized
by the abandonment of his wife, the giving of drugs to intoxicate former core-
ligionists, and even his involvement in raids on Portuguese possessions – these
took place before October 1615, when a tripartite treaty was signed with
Ahmadnagar and Bijapur which put an end, among other things, to a series
of local skirmishes in the Chaul area and declared that the Dutch and English
should be kept out of Nizam Shahi territory.  

The runaways who accused Gomes evoked a confusing and dangerous world
in which their usual identity markers, such as clothing and Christianity, sim-
ply ceased to exist. They tried to put their own actions into perspective. Once
all official ties with the Portuguese empire had dissolved, even converting to
Islam could be seen as, if not acceptable, at least inevitable. Isolation made
entering the entourage of another renegade appear the lesser evi-

Overall, we are able to piece together a picture of a sizable presence of Portuguese in the
service of Malik ‘Ambar, among whom Gomes reached a leading position. This
information is already more than what is usually available on the lived experi-
ence of runaways, but inquisitorial sources alone do not give us access to the
trajectories and networks of the individuals to which they refer.

36 The verdict was issued on 2 March 1628 (*Processo Gomes*, fol. 41r–44v).
37 B.G. Tamaskar, “Malik Ambar and the Portuguese,” *Journal of the Andhra Historical
Portuguese mercenaries had a reputation as skilled artillerymen and their service was in high demand. They were so assimilated into the plural society of the Deccan in the Persianate age that their presence goes almost unmentioned in local sources, which show a general lack of interest in the Portuguese and their empire.\(^\text{38}\) Obviously this is not the case with the VOC and the EIC, which had recently started penetrating into Western India and were to establish the main base of their operations in Surat, a major seaport and trading center under Mughal rule in the Gulf of Cambay. They aimed at supplanting Portuguese dominance over maritime trade, as well as developing new commercial partnerships with the consent of local powers.\(^\text{39}\) Abundant information on the Portuguese is included in their records, however there are only sporadic references to those who served Muslim rulers as mercenaries.

The tripartite treaty of 1615 did not prevent the Dutch merchant Pieter van den Broecke, the future chief of the VOC establishment at Surat, from visiting Malik ‘Ambar in Khirki in the final months of 1617. The two had a friendly meeting, despite the hostility that “some Portuguese arnegados” in attendance showed to van den Broecke. His travel journal offers a vivid eyewitness description of the group: “Look at that proud dog [Vede iste suberbe can!]”, they are said to have exclaimed at the sight of the Dutch merchant, who evidently could understand their Portuguese. These mercenaries were held in high esteem by Malik ‘Ambar, as is evidenced by their request to be granted the command of a contingent with three thousand to five thousand horses, as well as the frank and direct way in which they warned the regent against his guest: “This dog comes to spy; watch out.” Van den Broecke depicted Khirki as a place where “one can buy everything one can imagine,” despite a devastating raid carried out by the Mughals in the previous month of February. Every year Malik ‘Ambar brought together a vast and diverse army to confront his enemies. The majority of these forces were Marathas and Habashis, as Africans were collectively known in western India. Among foreign combatants, van den Broecke noted, “there were many Portuguese ... who had all converted to Islam.” The most powerful among them were rewarded with money and villages, or an income. Nusrat Khan was


\(^{39}\) For a recent comparative exercise, see *The Dutch and English East India Companies: Diplomacy, Trade and Violence in Early Modern Asia*, eds. Adam Clulow and Tristan Mostert (Amsterdam, 2018).
almost surely one of these mercenary captains, even if the only one singled out by van den Broecke was “Mansour Gaen, a half-caste from India.”

Mansur Khan is well known to scholars, although no Portuguese sources on him have been identified and even his original name remains unknown. The EIC archives, nonetheless, allow us to document at least one connection between Mansur Khan and Nusrat Khan. This concerns the case of a *qafila* of 350 camels which the EIC loaded with goods in Agra, the capital of the Mughal empire. Careful preparations and agreements did not suffice to guarantee a safe trip to the caravan. The preferred route to Surat passed through the valley of the Tapti River and the city of Burhanpur, in Khandesh, which had been under Mughal control for almost twenty years but in the final months of 1620 was under siege from the Nizam Shahi army. When written assurances were received, the English convoy was ordered to leave Mandu, the ancient capital of Malwa, where it had paused for a time. Word reached Surat on March 15, 1621 of an assault on the caravan, with many being “wounded in its defence.”

It took some time to clarify that the attack had been orchestrated by Mansur Khan autonomously. In early September, his defection to Shahjahan (Prince Khurram), the future Mughal emperor (r. 1628–1658), became known to the English factors in Agra, who informed their superiors in Surat. The EIC representative, Robert Jeffries, was presumably unaware of the role of Mansur Khan in the incident when he set out from Chaul in the company of Khwaja Daud, a Nizam Shahi dignitary who escorted him to the Daulatabad area, where they arrived on October 25. Jeffries was tasked with reaching a settlement with Malik ‘Ambar on the damages caused by the loss of the *qafila*. None other than Nusrat Khan was among those who contributed to making Jeffries’s mission fail.

Portuguese renegades have a central place in Jeffries’s accounts of his mission to Ahmadnagar. On their first encounter, Malik ‘Ambar spoke through a Portuguese interpreter, while Jeffries answered directly in Portuguese. He

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41 Subrahmanyam, *The Portuguese Empire in Asia*, 268.
43 (EFI), vol. 1, 243. The response to the attack was carefully considered (EFI, vol. 1, 240, 248–249, 257 and 287).
44 Their letter was received in Surat on 2 October (EFI, vol. 1, 267).
45 (EFI), vol. 1, 296–297 and 315. Jeffries had arrived at Chaul on 28 September (EFI, vol. 1, 290).
46 Talks were held between 26 and 29 October. See the summary in (EFI, vol. 1, 316–317, from which I quote here below.
gave the regent letters from his superiors, which were read word by word, “like a schoole boy,” by the Portuguese interpreter. Jeffries made a request for 600,000 rupees as a compensation for the caravan, after which the audience was concluded. The atmosphere had been pleasant and relaxed. In the second meeting, however, things immediately took a turn for the worse. Malik ‘Ambar’s behavior changed, a sign of disagreement about the high repayment Jeffries was asking for. This is exactly when Nusrat Khan makes an appearance in the English sources. He is the sole arrenegado called by name, although Jeffries seems only to have known him as “Jasper Gomes.” Portrayed as a confidential counsellor of Malik ‘Ambar but also someone to profoundly distrust, Nusrat Khan was arguably behind the order not to allow in Jeffries’s interpreter, Robert Lea. This would have had the effect of permitting Nusrat Khan to exchange views with Malik ‘Ambar in a language that Jeffries could not follow, possibly Dakhani or Persian, or even Marathi.47 If so, the trick worked only in part. “Fearinge the Portugalls dishonestie in that office,” Jeffries eventually managed to persuade Malik ‘Ambar to let Lea attend the meeting and translate his words. The general tone of the conversation, however, had been set by then. Malik ‘Ambar had no difficulty in exposing the EIC’s contradiction. How could they “come to him for monie and yet robb his ship,” he asked in a biting reference to a junk returning from the Red Sea which an English vessel had recently seized in reprisal.48

Malik ‘Ambar dismissed Jeffries without even giving him a written answer. The EIC representative felt much better treated by Khwaja Daud, who visited him before his return to the coast. It seems that only on that occasion did Jeffries learn that the attack on the qafila was “fathered upon Mounsier Can, the Portugall renegado, who is fled from Kirkee to the Mogoll.”49 It is difficult to say what Nusrat Khan thought of Mansur Khan’s desertion from Ahmadnagar. One thing is clear, though: Portuguese runaways in the early seventeenth-century Deccan may have been mercenaries but were not indifferent to the identity of those with whom they interacted; Northern European Protestants never stopped being seen as enemies.

48 EFI, vol. 1, 272–273. The EIC estimated that the junk was not worth 300,000 rupees (EFI, vol. 1, 324).
49 As he wrote to Surat on 30 October 1621 (EFI, vol. 1, 318). Later references to the incident in EFI, vol. 2, 18 and 200–204; vol. 3, 192 and 194.
Building Mercenary Networks in a Frontier Society

Both Mansur Khan and Nusrat Khan had extraordinary careers in Ahmadnagar, although the first always remained faithful to his warlike nature, while the second revealed greater versatility and political ambition – in this being similar to Sancho Pires, a bombardier from Matosinhos (Portugal) who fled to the Nizam Shahi sultanate where, after converting to Islam, he rose to the post of general, was given the title of Firangi Khan, and became an influential counsellor of Burhan I (r. 1509–1553).\(^{50}\) At this point it is natural to wonder what relationship existed between Mansur Khan and Nusrat Khan and how other runaways could become part of their entourage or simply join Malik ‘Ambar’s army. The Europeans who crossed the borders with Ahmadnagar needed guidance and, if possible, good connections. As Jeffries warned on his way back from Daulatabad, it was “dangerous travailing in the Hindoes countrie without companie.”\(^{51}\)

Portuguese mercenaries tended to affiliate with one of the groups led by arrenegados in the Deccan. They often used previous contacts with other runaways, as is illustrated by the accounts that Filipe de Figueiredo, a young Portuguese soldier from Évora, made to the Goa inquisitors on his two returns from Ahmadnagar. On first impression, Figueiredo’s declarations of October 1619 fit in with standard fiction crafted for the court. About two years earlier he had joined two other men from Portugal who were only a few years older, Cipriano de Azevedo, a pardo natural (native dark-skinned) from Coimbra and João Baptista, a mulato from Évora. The trio went to Chaul, where Figueiredo was deceived into following the travel companions to the “Balaghat,” as the Portuguese called the region roughly corresponding to the Deccan plateau. Once at the camp of Malik ‘Ambar, the two others embraced Islam and married local women. Left “alone,” Figueiredo had no choice but to give in to Gomes’s methods of persuasion, become a Muslim, and be received in his house. One detail makes this story stand out. It turns out that Azevedo had a brother called Sebastião Pacheco, who had served Malik ‘Ambar for “many years.”\(^{52}\) His assistance was presumably important in enabling the three runaways to traverse the Nizam Shahi sultanate and reach their destination.

As the reader will recall, the mulato Pacheco was the only renegade mentioned by name in Gomes’s depositions before the Goa Inquisition, in which he is even referred to by the diminutive, “Bastião.” Their friendly relationship is encapsulated by the amusing vignette of Pacheco offering Gomes an English

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\(^{50}\) Cruz, “Exiles and Renegades,” 261–262.

\(^{51}\) Summary of a letter to the Surat factors, 2 November 1621 (EFI, vol. 1, 318).

\(^{52}\) Deposition of Filipe de Figueiredo, 29 October 1619 (Processo Gomes, fols. 25v–26v).
Bible, which he quickly returned, saying “that it was in Castilian” because he could not read it. According to Figueiredo, Pacheco and Gomes were at the head of two separate groups. Not only did family ties encourage Azevedo and his *mulato* companion’s transfer to Ahmadnagar, but they also facilitated their prompt integration into Pacheco’s band of mercenaries. Every man who could fight, however, had a value. Therefore, once abandoned, Figueiredo became perfect prey for Gomes.

Azevedo’s move to the Nizam Shahi sultanate may well have been engineered by his brother Pacheco through written communication. Exchanging letters was a determining factor in maintaining mercenary networks across the *Província do Norte* and the Deccan, as is shown by Figueiredo’s detailed and extensive accounts upon his second return from Ahmadnagar. It was the summer of 1626. Gomes had passed away. Figueiredo must have thought that his own declaration could not harm him anymore. He thus disclosed that the two had developed a strong bond between 1617 and 1619, which was the main reason why he soon resumed his service with Gomes. Having enlisted in the Portuguese fleet which was stationed off the coast of the *Província do Norte*, during a stop in Chaul, Figueiredo was reached by a foot soldier with a letter from Gomes, who was somehow aware of his recent arrival. Gomes asked Figueiredo to “join” him in Ahmadnagar. He also promised that the two would be together “when he would go back to our lands,” thus attesting that his intention to return to the Portuguese empire dates at least from the early 1620s.

Figueiredo stayed with Gomes when the latter held the position of captain (*thanadar*) of the southern fort of Parenda, which had previously been the Nizam Shahi capital in the early seventeenth century. He also formed part of the large group which traveled back to Chaul with Gomes in mid-1625. Things, however, turned out badly for Figueiredo. He fell off his horse, was captured, then handed back to Malik ‘Ambar, whose death in May 1626 gave him one

54 Figueiredo was sentenced to abjure in front of the Inquisition, as he did on 19 November 1619, according to João Delgado Figueira’s *Reportório* of the Goa Inquisition’s trials in the 1561–1623 period (BNP, Códice 203, fol. 343v). It was also agreed that Figueiredo would not be considered a relapse in case of a second trial (*Processo Gomes*, fol. 24v).
55 *Processo Gomes*, fol. 28v. Figueiredo is said to have joined the *Armada do Norte* when Diogo de Melo de Sampaio was its *capitão-mor*. This was in 1620, according to a letter from Fernão de Albuquerque, governor of Portuguese Asia, to King Philip III, Goa, 7 February 1620, published in *Documentos remetidos da Índia ou Livros das Monções*, eds. Raymundo António de Bulhão Pato and António da Silva Rego, 10 vols. (Lisbon, 1880–1982) (*LM*), vol. 6, 246.
56 Deposition 7 August 1626 (*Processo Gomes*, fol. 30r).
final opportunity to flee and reach Goa after securing a safe-conduct from the Holy Office.\textsuperscript{57}

Gomes’s case file contains two letters in copy which give us the exceptional opportunity to read Portuguese mercenaries’ actual pieces of writing, with their rhetoric and formulas, as well as to appreciate how much their networks relied on papers both in Ahmadnagar and in Portuguese territory. The first missive was penned on an unspecified date by Nicolau Ribeiro Lobo, a nephew of Gomes. A fugitive from justice, Lobo also had issues with his family in Bassein when he reached his uncle somewhere in the Nizam Shahi sultanate, perhaps at Parenda. At the time of writing, he was preparing to leave at dawn to join Malik ‘Ambar. He waited for his uncle Gomes until late that night but could not say farewell to him. However, Lobo urgently needed a recommendation that vouched for the good opinion of him as a soldier which he had earned “in the fights that I had and wherever I went.” Lobo’s written plea was made more persuasive by praising Gomes as someone who was “held in high esteem and listened to by the Malik” and the person behind the rise of Mansur Khan (Masurcan Coogi). In a desperate attempt, Lobo added that if he went back to Bassein, he would have had to hide his face “for the shame, because I came to this Ghat without saying that I would return before very long.”\textsuperscript{58}

The second letter was from a disillusioned Portuguese, who feared his “status and reputation” would not improve “in the service of my king or my faith.” Diogo Saraiva wrote to Gomes from Chaul on September 1, 1624. He sought his help in entering into the service of Malik ‘Ambar, emphatically described as a “great captain in the world,” whose “name is so exalted that it exceeds that of Alexander and the Ancient Romans.” Saraiva trusted that Gomes’s intervention would be effective at a time when Malik ‘Ambar needed soldiers because he “was in the field,” arguably a reference to the confrontation that a few days later culminated in the battle of Bhatvadi, in which the Nizam Shahi army unexpectedly defeated a coalition of Bijapur, Golconda, and Mughal forces. Saraiva boasted about having been invited to join the ‘Adil Shahi troops by none other than Dom Vasco da Gama, a former Portuguese captain of Chaul and brother of the current viceroy, Dom Francisco da Gama. Saraiva kept Gama’s letters from the port city of Dabhol “as a proof” of that exchange. His preference was obviously for Malik ‘Ambar, who was then on good terms with the Portuguese. Saraiva described him as one of those “conquering lords [who] have any sort of people in their army and the better you fight the better place you have in

\textsuperscript{57} Deposition of 3 August 1626 (Processo Gomes, fol. 29r). Figueirêdo was sentenced to abjure in a public auto-da-fé and be sent back to Portugal (Processo Gomes, fol. 25r).

\textsuperscript{58} Processo Gomes, fols. 3v–4v.
their houses.” He asked Gomes for “a letter with a safe-conduct” and declared even to be resolved to pay a sum of money as security.⁵⁹ We do not know if Gomes really wrote in Saraiva’s support, but six years later we find the latter at the court of Ahmadnagar where he served as an informant of the Portuguese viceroy, Dom Miguel de Noronha (r. 1629–1635), at the same time as being the Nizam Shahi procurator in Chaul.⁶⁰

Gomes established himself as an influential broker in the military labor market of the frontier society to which he belonged, as well as a trusted leader with a coterie of arrenegados who followed him from one fortress to another in Ahmadnagar. Figures such as Nusrat Khan and Mansur Khan acted as magnets for Portuguese mercenaries. Tales about their achievements circulated widely, at least in Goa and Chaul. The cases of Gomes’s nephew, Lobo, or the brothers Pacheco and Azevedo also highlight how important kinship was in shaping the networks of those who deserted the Portuguese empire. The decision to leave was not necessarily an easy one and was often motivated by poverty and debt, not to mention problems with the law. Even those who could speak some Marathi or Dakhani, once they had crossed the border, needed to know where to go and to quickly learn how to fit into a military life which was not without rules and risks. In a context in which allegiance was fluid and many were known by more than one name, letters were much more than a means of communication; they were indispensable in proving one’s identity or saving their life.⁶¹

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⁵⁹ Processo Gomes, fols. 4v–6v. Gama was captain of Chaul in the 1618–1621 period, during which he was also involved in illegal trade in marble from Mozambique Island (LM, vol. 6, 159), a behavior that was not uncommon among imperial officials. See Anthony R. Disney, “Smugglers and Smuggling in the Western Half of the Estado da India in the Late Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries,” in his The Portuguese in India and Other Studies, 1500–1700 (London, 2009), iv. After a troubled handover to Dom Francisco Manuel, Gama spent the rest of 1621 in “the lands of the Moors,” then came to Goa, but in February 1622 had vanished without trace (LM, vol. 7, 416).


Mansur Khan defected to Shahjahan after his reaction to the raids by Malik 'Ambar's forces deep into Mughal territory in 1619–1620. Shahjahan's six-week campaign following the full recovery of Burhanpur had a devastating effect. Khirki was occupied and burnt, while the Nizam Shahi court was forced to move to the fort of Daulatabad until Malik 'Ambar negotiated a peace treaty in May 1621. As a commander of a large contingent whose feats had earned him a great reputation, Mansur Khan was “receaved with great honour” by Shahjahan in Burhanpur.62 His decision to flee was probably due to the fear that it was just a matter of time until the end of the Sultanate of Ahmadnagar.

Mansur Khan was not the only military leader who left Malik 'Ambar in 1621. In October, the Maratha general (sardar) Jadu Rai (Lakuji Jadhav Rao) also teamed up with the Mughal army.63 Although at different times, both Mansur Khan and Jadu Rai would turn their back on Shahjahan, whose attempt to secure his succession to the throne evolved from being a simmering conflict with his brothers into an open rebellion against his father, the emperor Jahangir (r. 1605–1627). According to the latter's memoirs, Mansur Khan was still in Shahjahan's army in late March 1623, when they were operating in the area north of Agra after a vain attempt to capture the capital city. Now the imperial troops were moving against them.64 Finding himself in perilous circumstances, Mansur Khan betrayed his commander again. In mid-April, he came into the service of Jahangir, together with a brother called Maghrur, and was soon promoted to the high rank (mansab) of four thousand zat and three thousand sawar.65

The actions of Mansur Khan and his brother in northern India are also chronicled in a detailed letter written by a Portuguese Jesuit father in Agra, António de Andrade, who confirms that Mansur Khan was “received with many honors” by Jahangir. Andrade seems not to have known his Portuguese

62 I quote from the letter of the EIC factors in Agra cited in footnote 46.

63 His desertion to the Mughals is recorded in a letter sent from the EIC factory in Burhanpur to the Surat Council on 18 November 1621 (EFI, vol. 1, 332). See also EFI, vol. 1, 318. Jadu Rai's flight followed the so-called “Khandagale Incident,” in which an elephant caused several victims, thus exacerbating tensions among Nizam Shahi warlords; Shahjahan's intrigues also had a role (Tamaskar, The Life and Work of Malik Ambar, 111–112).


65 The Jahangirnama, 395. The name of Mansur Khan's brother does not appear in The Tūzuk-i-Jāhāngīrī, 258.
name but also refers to him as “the mulato from Coimbra.” It is thanks to this designation that we are finally able to identify Mansur Khan and his brother Maghrur with Sebastião Pacheco and Cipriano de Azevedo respectively, which also demonstrates that the link between Nusrat Khan and Mansur Khan was a strong one. Andrade even offers a brief account of Mansur Khan’s valiant death in action, in July 1623, in the Malwa region, where Shahjahan’s forces had converged. A less honorable version can be read in Jahangir’s memoirs, according to which, being drunk on wine, Mansur Khan suddenly decided to give chase to a small contingent of Maratha cavalrmen (bargirs) seen in the distance; he ventured too far and ended up being killed by troops ironically commanded by Malik ‘Ambar’s former general, Jadu Rai.

Mansur Khan entered the turbulent world of the Mughals on his own initiative. Being in the service of Shahjahan and Jahangir meant that he fought alongside feared antagonists of the Portuguese in India. However, this did not prevent him from dealing with other Portuguese. His meeting with Father Andrade occurred in Ajmer, presumably in May or June 1623. The Jesuit’s account is made more dramatic by Mansur Khan’s alleged promise that the expedition against Shahjahan would be his last campaign, after which he would publicly return to Catholicism. What is notable in this otherwise standard conversion narrative is that Mansur Khan’s plans seem to have never included a return to Portuguese territory.

Nusrat Khan was not excluded from Catholic missionary networks either. At the time of Mansur Khan’s death in the Mughal empire, Nusrat Khan had made progress in his project to get back home thanks to a safe-conduct from the Inquisition. He had possibly asked for it through the friars of the Franciscan province of the Capuchos, with whom he maintained a correspondence while in Ahmadnagar signing his letters as Gomes. A new appointment closer to the border with the Província do Norte in a north-western district (sarkar) of the Nizam Shahi sultanate may be the reason behind his petition for a letter of recommendation from the provincial of the Capuchos in Chaul, which was made available to Gomes in the summer of 1624. Included in Gomes’s case file, the missive depicts him as a most devoted benefactor and is addressed to the Capuchos in Daman. They were urged to be of assistance should Gomes, or

67 The Jahangirnâma, 403. Jadu Rai abandoned Shahjahan’s army sometime later.
68 Annual letter cited above in footnote 66.
someone of his entourage, arrive in town and ask “for friars to accompany him, to stay in their convent or whatever else he needed.”

Nusrat Khan’s personal papers must have included many credentials and letters of transit in the final months of his stay in Ahmadnagar. Crossing the border with the Portuguese empire was a dangerous matter for someone in the public eye like him. If he did not participate in the battle of Bhatvadi (September 1624), he certainly stayed in touch with Malik ‘Ambar in the following period when the regent used the recent victory to consolidate his political and military position in the Deccan. Nusrat Khan had to act with the greatest prudence. On June 1, 1625, he answered a letter from the guardian of Madre de Deus, the convent of the Capuchos in Chaul and, in another remarkable piece of evidence from Gomes’s case file, informed him confidentially that he was drawing near the town. Gomes warmly thanked the friars for their prayers, which had allowed him to come so close to his “homeland (patria),” and were now asked to plead with Christ “finally to bring me to a safe harbor, out of all dangers and obstacles that can stand in the way.”

The trepidation which can be felt in these lines may result from the deterioration in Malik ‘Ambar’s relationship with the Portuguese. All we know is that on June 10 the latter came to a truce with the Nizam Shahi resident in Dabhol, which had been wrested from Bijapur earlier that year. An explicit reference to Nusrat Khan in a Nizam Shahi document adds a further detail to this reconstruction. Towards the end of June, Malik ‘Ambar wrote a response to the revenue administrator (karkun) of the province (mamla) of Chaul, who had appealed for an extra hundred soldiers because of unspecified machinations of the “Firangis,” that is, the Portuguese. Malik ‘Ambar approved the request and informed him that Nusrat Khan had recently reached the border in Revdanda. It is unclear on whose initiative he had gone there, but his intention to flee seems to have been unknown to Malik ‘Ambar at the time.

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69 Copy of the letter sent from Father António dos Anjos in Chaul on 6 August 1624 (Processo Gomes, fol. 9r–v). Capuchos should not be confused with Capuchins.

70 The letter was sent “from the Balaghat” (Processo Gomes, fols. 9v–10v). On the Convent of Madre de Deus in Chaul, see Grötz von Mitterwallner, Chaul: Eine unerforschte Stadt an der Westküste Indiens (Wehr-, Sakral- und Profanarchitektur) (Berlin, 1964), 193–197.

71 Radhey Shyam, The Kingdom of Ahmadnagar (Delhi, 1966), 356; Tamaskar, The Life and Work of Malik Ambar, 141.

72 The letter, which is dated 28 June 1625, is published in Śiva-caritra-sāhitya, 13 vols. (Pune, 1926–1965), vol. 4, no. 710 (bilingual Persian-Marathi document). Special thanks go to Prachi Deshpande and Sanjay Subrahmanyam for assisting me in reading this source.
from passing.” Some were captured, but Gomes and most of his relatives managed to escape to Portuguese territory.73

Years of preparation and dissimulation had preceded the return of Nusrat Khan. It was not a story of loyalty to the Portuguese empire, although Gomes was clearly aware and fully respectful of the institutional procedure that he would have to undergo in order to be lawfully readmitted to Portuguese rule. It is also hard to believe that his decision was motivated by nostalgia for his birthplace, despite the patriotic feelings for Chaul expressed in the heartfelt letter to the local Capuchos when approaching the town. We may, however, concede some desire to retreat into private life in a man who had spent more than half of his adulthood in a foreign land. Family was important to Gomes. He had started a new one in Ahmadnagar but still had at least one brother in Chaul, to whom he gifted a negrinha (dark-skinned female servant) on his return. Moreover, in Goa where he would purchase “houses” in a coconut grove, he could be together again with a daughter from his first marriage who lived there.74

Gomes was the head of a patriarchal household. The large and diverse group that he brought back with him included a son and two daughters, all born in Ahmadnagar, as well as enslaved women, servants, concubines, and many children. He had judiciously made a missionary baptize all of them before crossing the border, with the exception of one of his Muslim wives and their two-year-old daughter who therefore were left behind together with other women and servants – possibly a clue to a rushed departure.75 The meeting of Gomes’s new family with his older daughter and her husband, Francisco Almeida de Gouveia, did not go well, despite Gomes trying to please his son-in-law by offering him another negrinha. Soon after Gomes showed up in front of the Inquisition, Almeida being the “grave and honest Portuguese” he was, informed the tribunal through a Jesuit that “he does not find in the house of his father-in-law the evidence of conversion that he wishes.”76 Only Gomes’s death prevented the denunciation from going ahead. Returning to the empire was not without its dangers for Portuguese mercenaries and their families.

73 Deposition of 3 August 1626 (Processo Gomes, fol. 29r).
74 A valuable list of Gomes’s household members is in Processo Gomes, fols. 2v–3v. The Capucho who baptized Gomes’s clan in Ahmadnagar was called Pedro das Chagas.
75 Copy of the undated letter from the Italian father Flaminio Calo to the inquisitors of Goa (Processo Gomes, fol. 2r–v). Calo served as prosecutor of the Inquisition in the following years (Baião, A Inquisição de Goa, vol. 1, 173).
Conclusion

The stories of Mansur Khan and Nusrat Khan were ones of struggle and changing fortunes. The two renegades were, in this at least, representative of the majority of Portuguese runaways. What is really exceptional in the case study presented in this article is the paper trail left by the return of Nusrat Khan. Once the fictional elements in the inquisitorial materials have been carefully identified, scrutinized, and combined with other sources produced independently, we are able to rescue the *mestiço* Gaspar Gomes de Faria, the *mulato* Sebastião Pacheco, and a few others from an otherwise anonymous multitude of mercenaries in seventeenth-century India. The unique opportunity to analyze their networks at close range reveals an attitude towards the Portuguese empire which does not match a flat picture of circumvention and exploitation. Rather, a microhistorical examination of their cross-border mobility raises the general question of how everyday actors faced rapid and disruptive changes brought about locally by imperial rivalry and long-distance commerce in the early modern world.

Detailed studies of Portuguese runaways in sixteenth-century Asia are based on a critical reading of chronicles and other official documents. These sources, however, are silent about mercenaries like Gomes and Pacheco because they did not serve, even indirectly, the Portuguese Crown. Yet the elusive relationship with the world they came from is exactly what makes their cases worthy of special attention. Nusrat Khan, Mansur Khan, and other less successful renegades were attracted by the possibility of improving their low status and difficult material conditions but were also deeply immersed in the plural society of the north-western Deccan, where they systematically embraced Islam, at least outwardly. This poses the problem of their cultural and religious trajectories and how these depended on interaction with specific contexts and circumstances, however inextricably merged with processes that were global in nature.

Portuguese mercenary networks were interstitial and largely determined the unfolding of the relationship that renegades developed with the frontier zone across which they moved and in which, more often than not, one’s destiny

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was a matter of local knowledge, personal connections, and family relations, as well as dissimulation, insight, and reputation. This trans-imperial microcosm was held together by the use of letters and other papers as a means of communication as well as identification and recommendation. Writing a social history of runaways and their networks entails locating them within and outside the Portuguese empire through a careful collation of a variety of records created by different powers and institutions. One may conclude that global microhistory is a matter of space and mobility as much as of the reconstitution of a composite archive which enables historians to grapple with general processes through localized histories of cross-cultural human landscapes.

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